Good News For The Homesick
Psalm 137:1-6
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Sometime during this season you're going to think about how it used to be. Something will set it off - a favorite carol, seeing a Christmas tree decorated in a certain way; perhaps it will be the odor of fresh pine or cookies baking. Sometime you're going to become nostalgic, and if you didn't know better it might occur to you that you are homesick.

Madison Avenue knows how vulnerablw you are and is doing its very best to convince you that you can go home - directly, through the good offices of your travel agent, or indirectly through the miracle of the telephone, or vicariously - if you happen already to be home - by the purchase of this or that. The words "Old-fashioned" and "Christmas" go together like Santa and Reindeer. And just yesterday, sitting in the Lodge at Broad Acres I found myself involved in a spirited debate regarding the relative merits of short needle versus long needle Christmas trees. My adversary, whose opinions and ideas are otherwise very rational and enlightened, and I admitted that our positions were determined by how it had been for us in the past - which is to say, in the simple matter of selecting a tree, we're going home for Christmas.

The 137th Psalm is about nostalgia - homesickness. It's about people in one place remembering how it was in another place - home. Scholars believe that it is not a liturgical document; that it was never used in Temple worship nor was it intended for that use. It seems to be a Folk Song, written in the sixth century B.C., by a man who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile. He wrote a song to tell those who had remained in Jerusalem how it was in Babylon.

The setting may be reconstructed easily. Historians describe the wide moat which surrounded the city of Babylon on all sides, and the Euphrates River which ran through the middle of the city. There were benches and seats built by the river for people to rest, and there were many willow trees growing along its banks. The Jews were in Babylon as captives - exiles, following the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple.

The writer remembers an occasion when a group of Jews sat down by the river and began to talk about home. In fact, they began to sing a few songs about Zion - Jerusalem - the Temple. A group of Babylonians approached: I envision a gang of ruffians: "Look at the Jews! Sitting around crying about home: O.K. Fellas, if it was so great, sing us a song about it! Let's hear one!"

I envision that terrible humiliation which results when one's deepest loyalties and most passionate loves are ridiculed. It was the ultimate degradation. And so the writer remembered: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

And then he adds a vow -

> "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither away.
> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not
> remember you."

That's how it was in Babylon. They had an intense case of that common human malady called homesickness. But for the Jews there was another dimension to it which made their pain more acute. The fact that they were in Babylon, under house arrest, as it were, meant that they were cut off from God. And the fact is that after a

generation of captivity some of them were beginning to wonder whether or not the people - the nation - could survive. The impetus to settle in and assimilate with the Babylonian culture was very strong. Practical people were doing it. All of which made the longing for Jerusalem - the longing for home - more intensely felt.

The Good News arrived in Babylon by way of a message from a prophet writing from Jerusalem. His words are found in the 40th chapter of Isaiah:

> "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
> Your sins are forgiven
> Build a highway through the desert.
> You're coming home!"

The idea of homesickness - loneliness - is one of the most powerful and enduring literary themes. In fact, it's amazing to discover how very frequently it occurs - as in the case of Psalm 137, in Folk Music: "When Johnny Comes Marching Home again, Hoorah!":."My Old Kentucky Home". Out of the American slavery experience Black Folk Music, not surprisingly, identified home as somewhere else altogether: "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot: Comin' for to carry me Home."

My resident experts helped me discover the instances in which the idea appears in contemporary folk music: John Denver's Take Me Home, Country Road, to the place where I belong." Simon and Garfunkle, "Homeward Bound - home where my thoughts are waitin', home where the music's playin'..." and several years ago a song which even I knew, "...Five Hundred Miles, five hundred miles...Lord, I'm five hundred miles away from home."

The experience of deep homesickness is timeless and international. The Irish long for Ireland - even those who have never set foot on it. All over the world Scots gather on Bobbie Burns' birthday to sing Scottish songs, tell the stories, and if not eat a Haggis, at least talk about it. The Scottish loyalty to home is legendary. And in all the world today perhaps the most powerful single idea is the idea of Israel: the idea of going home, claiming one's real identity, if not literally, then certainly psychologically, emotionally.

The idea of home and the feeling of homesickness are permanent parts of our mental furniture, it seems. And there is something about Christmas, some emotional conspiracy, which releases the feelings openly at this time of year as at none other. Of those who remember anything about the Second World War, who will ever forget the impact of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas, just like the ones I used to know?" The season is literally loaded with nostalgia. "I'll Be Home For Christmas", one of the pop songs intones, and I would guess that it is safe to say that everyone of us will. We're going to remember how it was: we're going to preserve each memory in detail: we're going to call our parents or brother and sister or children on Christmas: and throughout this season we will find ourselves lost in reminiscence on more than one occasion. We're all going to go home. Given the way our entire culture plays on and exploits it, I still wonder about this deep association between homesickness and Christmas.

Entertain for a moment the suggestion that the universal feeling we identify as homesickness is really suggestive of a deeply significant part of the human psyche: a deep sense of dis-ease which exists in everyone and which is released, permitted and contained in the normal feelings of loneliness and homesickness which we all experience.

I was interested in a book Vance Packard wrote in 1972 called A Nation of Strangers. Packard noted the tremendous mobility of the American people in the mid-twentieth century and set out to discover what kinds of behavioral and emotional ramifications it was having. My interest was partly personal, having lived in a community as a young minister which was quite stable and non-mobile and thus having my own separation amplified. It was also professional because our next home was in a highly mobile neighborhood. We were surrounded by people in transition, on their way to somewhere else. Home was something in the past or future perhaps. The present environment was a temporary stopping place only. I thought I detected a difference in the way people behaved: a distinct lack of interest in and commitment to the kinds of ideas and institutions normally associated with home, and a kind of reserved distance between actual neighbors because everyone knew that they wouldn't be neighbors very long. I was delighted to have Mr. Packard confirm my suspicions. In his book he notes that mobility seems to destroy any sense of belonging. In time this loss results in a "lowered social capacity" and an increasing number of people who are "indifferent to all close associations". Packard even suggests that mobility is related to both mental and physical illness. (Time Magazine, September 11, 1972).

Mobility exaggerates the sense of homesickness. But there is a sense in which it is felt even by those who are not mobile: a deeper, philosophic sense of separation from that which is ultimate. One of the most powerful paragraphs I have ever read is the frontispiece to Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel. Listen to part of it:

> "Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face, from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and uncommunicable prison of earth. Which of us has known our brother? Which of us has looked into his father's heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone..Lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven...an unfound door. Where? When?"

Wolfe brings us to the edge of theology. There is something innately human about homesickness, something that has to do with our very nature. What do you need most desparately? What do you want above all else? Reuel Howe answers that question: "...the deepest desire of all is to be at one with someone": and suggests that the desire "grows out of a profound loneliness...not the loneliness of people who have not known love and who do not have friends: the deepest loneliness is that of the people who have known love." (Man's Need and God's Action, p.9).

With marvelous insight Howe suggests that human love bears within it the frustration of incompleteness. We are unable to meet the need of each other totally - because even as we give love our own need for love demands more from the other. Poets and lovers always know the pain of the deepest love.

We are lonely - so say the writers, philosophers and the theologians. Reuel Howe writes plainly: "Loneliness is hell. Hell is irrevocable and final loneliness." (Ibid, p. 10).

I find that the New Testament is never very far from the latest brilliant discovery in the social and behavioral sciences. And I find in the Gospel the idea

that the human dilemma is separation: separation from others, from self, and from God. Jesus used the idea of home as the context of the Good News most memorably in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And St. Paul, in that difficult discourse in the 8th Chapter of Romans suggests that the experience of salvation is not unlike a reunion with a father we once knew but from whom we have been separated. Salvation, for Paul, was very much a matter of coming home.

In his excellent little book, Life in Christ Jesus, Professor John Knox tells the story of a thirteen year old boy away from home for the first time who wrote his parents a very poignant letter. He expressed not only the simple kind of homesickness a young boy feels on the second day of Scout Camp, but on a deeper level raised, for the first time in life, the most profound human question: "What is the purpose of life?" John Knox suggests that it was not simply a coincidence that the boy found himself facing the question at that time. Rather it was precisely because he was separated from the environment to which he had always looked for security and love that the question emerged. His pain, Knox suggests, was not because he didn't know the answer to the question but because he was cut off from the people who loved him.

"So with us," the Professor wrote: "Our malady is not ignorance but homesickness. What we all most deeply need is not an answer to the ultimate question about our existence, but an environment of relationships which will enable us to bear the unanswered and unanswerable question." (Ibid, p.96).

We know that in our own experience. We know the power of human contact to break down the barriers of separation. We know how an embrace or a handclasp communicates more than we can ever verbalize - particularly when we have had a period of separation. We know how a tender pat can make even intense pain more bearable. We know the healing, redeeming power of being in touch - in relationship - in love.

Parents know the profound truth in the child's cry: "Kiss it and make it better". And sensitive parents know that children's ultimate and difficult questions are more often than not a plea for the security of relationship. The best answer for a four year old who asks, "When will I die? What's it like?" is never verbal, but that best answer of all - a warm embrace.

Our condition is homesickness. Alienation, estrangement, separation - but most of all homesickness, because deep within us we know Him from whom we are separated: He has planted His image in us and inclined our hearts toward Him: hearts which, Augustine wrote centuries ago, are restless until they find rest in Him.

The reason why Christmas seems to magnify our feelings of homesickness, the reason why the Christmas story seems to release nostalgia in the hearts of all people, is that it is, essentially Good News for the homesick. It is an invitation to a reunion with the Father from whom we have been separated. In Jesus' own version of it the love of the Father was felt in the prodigal son's heart even across the miles. The son remembered how it was in his father's house and said to himself "I'm going home". And as he approached, his father, you will recall, ran down the road to greet him and it was a great and wonderful homecoming.

So in the Christ Child God has come to invite us home - to welcome us back into His household.

On Christmas Eve, 1943, a very lonely G.I. was walking the streets of Philadelphia. He was from a Swedish Lutheran home in the Mid-West, and as he walked he remembered how it was when he was a boy: how they went to bed early and got up at 4:30: how they ate some of the special Christmas cake the Swedes bake: how they went to Church at 5:30 a.m. in the darkness of Christmas morning and sat enrapt by the candles and music: how they finished the Christmas cake and then - finally - opened their gifts. As he walked with his homesickness he grew bitter and angry. On a chance he stopped at a phone booth and in the yellow pages discovered that there was a Swedish Lutheran Church in Philadelphia. He took a cab and on the Church there was a sign announcing the traditional 5:30 a.m. service. He returned the next morning and as soon as he sat in the pew - arms reached out to touch him and hands to welcome him. A family invited him to join them after the service for the cake and celebration and he stayed the day. He was "Home" in a special way for Christmas.

The Gospel of Christmas is in that: very Good News for the Homesick. John Knox writes eloquently:

> "We may, or may not, find the answers to our question. But may we not fail to be found of Him, who is Himself the answer to more than our question - the answer to our deepest need as persons! For to be found of Him is breath, and bread, and drink and health and home." (Ibid, p.97-98).

May it be so for you this year. May Christmas be a reunion - a joyful homecoming with the Father - Who in the drama of Bethleham has opened wide the door.

Amen.

Our Father, we are grateful for the beauty and joy of this season. Help us to sense, in the midst of it all, your moving toward us in Love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.